

(13)

DR COBBOLD'S ADDRESS

AT THE

OPENING OF THE ROYAL MEDICAL SOCIETY'S NEW HALL,
No. 7, MELBOURNE PLACE, NOVEMBER 7TH, 1852.

[FROM THE MONTHLY JOURNAL OF MEDICAL SCIENCE, DECEMBER 1852.]

ON Friday, the 19th ult., the Royal Medical Society took possession of their New Hall, No. 7, Melbourne Place, on which occasion there were upwards of 200 members and visitors present, including Professors Syme, Simpson, Gregory, Bennett, Balfour, and More, and a large number of the Fellows of the Royal Colleges of Physicians and Surgeons.

At public business, the Senior President, Dr Cobbold,¹ addressed the meeting as follows :—

GENTLEMEN,—Both gratitude and honour prompt us, on an occasion like the present, to draw aside the curtain of forgetfulness, and advert briefly to the history of the past (!)

You are well aware that the establishment of the Royal Medical Society of Edinburgh was first brought about by the energy of a few enlightened individuals. “ These youthful aspirants after truth perceived that it was not merely the frigid plodding over books, nor the doctrines and precepts of age and authority, nor the detail of empirical practice, that could inspire that taste and spirit, and give that manly tone to our inquiries which alone can render study agreeable, vigorous, and successful. They perceived that it was in *society* alone, by the mutual communication and reflection of the lights of reason and knowledge, that the intellectual as well as the moral powers of man are exalted and perfected.”

During the first few years of the Society's existence, its weekly meetings were held at a tavern in the vicinity of the College ; but, by permission of the managers of the Royal Infirmary, two apartments were afterwards provided in that Institution, *one* room being used exclusively as a library (which had already mustered some thousand volumes), the *other* employed for purposes of debate. Nearly forty years had thus expired, when the scheme for erecting a

¹ The junior presidents are, Dr W. H. Broadbent, Dr W. M. Dobie, and Dr J. M'Grigor MacLagan.

Hall was first set on foot by two of the Society's Presidents. This was seconded with liberality and zeal, both by its *then* present and former members, and ultimately led to the erection of the building in Surgeon Square, which at that time was one of the most flourishing districts in the Old Town. The foundation stone was laid by the illustrious Dr Cullen, on the 21st day of April 1775.

It would be foreign to our present purpose to enter into minute detail in connection with the history of the Society since that date. Such of you as are not familiar with its subsequent rise and progress, we would at once refer to Dr Stroud's history of the Medical Society, and also to the centenary oration delivered by Dr Carpenter on the 17th of February 1837.¹

As regards the building itself, and the accommodation it was designed to supply, it can scarcely be admitted to have fully answered the calculations of its early projectors, inasmuch as they evidently anticipated that ample space would be found for the accumulating treasures of many successive generations; and little did they think, that ere those "time-honoured walls" had manifested signs of decay, its overgrown library, and the now loathsome state of that once influential and healthy locality, would necessitate our removal to a more eligible site.

In the year 1819, at a period when the Society's funds received great augmentation from the overwhelming demand for "*seats*," it was deemed expedient to make an extension of the premises. Accordingly, a numerous committee, comprising several of the Professors of the University, was appointed to promote and obtain subscriptions; but, before taking any decided steps in this direction, it appeared to them advisable to concert some definite plan, calculated to recommend itself to universal approval. After mature deliberation, they came to the conclusion, that the project of *enlargement*, if practicable, would be, in many respects, preferable to that of re-building, chiefly on the score of comparative expense.

An architect was consulted, who estimated the value of the Hall at L.1200, the expense of a proposed wing (which was to be on the north side of the building) at L.1000, and the erection of a new Hall at L.4000.

During the following recess, the committee presented a petition to the Town Council, requesting, on behalf of the Society, the grant of a considerable portion of ground in the direction we have already indicated. This petition was both strongly recommended and favourably received, but was eventually declined, from what (now, indeed) fully appears to have been a just apprehension, that its admission would occasion an injurious encroachment on the Royal Infirmary, the limits of which Institution have all along been too much circumscribed. After this defeat, the committee recommended the purchase of one of the opposite houses; but this suggestion was fortunately and very wisely abandoned.

Thus, gentlemen, we perceive that the Society, "*from a want of external facilities*," has suffered a temporary loss and interruption, extending over a

¹ From Dr Stroud's invaluable treatise, and from Dr Duncan's "Addresses" and "Account of the Building of the Medical Society," these introductory statements are gathered.—T. S. C.

period of "*more than thirty years !*" for we find that, from that date, there has been an almost constant decrease in the number of "*petitions for seats*" in each succeeding year ; and this is mainly attributable to the circumstances here specified, and *not* from any want of zeal on the part of its members, as some have foolishly imagined.

From this state of embarrassment we are happily emerging ; and the especial object for which we are this evening met, namely, "THE INAUGURATION OF THE NEW HALL OF THE ROYAL MEDICAL SOCIETY OF EDINBURGH," will ever hereafter be regarded as an important era in its history.

If, gentlemen, the old Hall, shortly after its erection, was pronounced from the Chair to be "a grand phenomenon of medical ardour," what words shall sufficiently characterise the magnificence of the *palace* in which we are now assembled ?

We will not further detain you with desultory comments on the suitability of the means now placed at our disposal. It behoves us rather to urge upon you the necessity of exerting your most strenuous efforts in the cause so ably advocated by our predecessors. We have received a thousand pleasures and advantages from their disinterested endeavours, and it is incumbent on us, and on every generation succeeding us, to enhance the value and reputation of this institution to the latest ages.

The grand objects of this Society are :—Mutual improvement and the investigation of truth ; the development of the seeds of genius, and the detection of falsehood ; the emancipation of the mind from the fetters of prejudice, and the cultivation of true friendship by social and liberal intercourse.

Such were the views and feelings of the founders of this Society ; and the happy effects of it upon their character and conduct have been fully proved, not only by their own testimony, but by that of their distinguished successors, many of whom honour us with their presence this evening ; and we venture to appeal to their experience, and to point to their position, as bearing ample testimony to the justice of these remarks.

We look to your exertions, gentlemen, as the guarantee of future success. Do not be slothful because it is often argued that merit cannot always ensure a corresponding reward. The insufficiency of merit and of honest endeavours to the acquisition of fame and fortune, will doubtless give occasion to the discontented to repine and to censure the economy of human affairs ; but they who are conversant in the investigation of final causes easily perceive that such a dispensation tends to perfect virtue by the exercise of patience. There *are* those who enter on the practice of our art totally destitute of preparatory instruction, and who make a merit of their defect. Without even those few lights which may be occasionally obtained in the course of a servile apprenticeship, they assume all the importance of sufficiency, and dictate with an oracular confidence. Against those vultures of mankind, against those harpies of society, who scatter pain and death around, under pretence of affording relief, and who, for the sake of supporting an unbecoming parade in life, not only delude, but destroy those who apply to them as friends under the pressure of the heaviest calamities, every honest mind must feel an indignant sentiment.¹

¹ Vicesimus Knox.

But, gentlemen, we are not discouraged. Greatly, indeed, is it to be regretted that popular esteem is so often misplaced, and rather tends to encourage bold, presumptuous, and unblushing ignorance, than to raise true merit from the vale of obscurity. Let us persevere in the profession in which honour and usefulness have induced us to embark, and so in the end shall we prove ourselves to have been worthy followers in the footsteps of the immortal founders of the Royal Medical Society.

